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ABSTRACT

A total of 57 parents of kindergarten children who participated in Columbus, Ohio's Child Assault Prevention Project (CAP) were surveyed in an effort to gather descriptive data on parent-child discussions, practice of prevention strategies, and parent attitudes. A questionnaire was developed and tested. Part 1 of the questionnaire elicited information about the parents, such as parents' marital status and educational level, parents' relationship to the child, the number of children in the household, and the presence of a step-parent or adults other than parents in the home. Part 2 contained four questions about discussion of the CAP program and sexual abuse prevention in general. Part 3 listed 16 prevention strategies and asked parents whether they had used them. An additional set of seven questions concerned parental attitudes toward the potential success of sexual abuse prevention and who they believed should be responsible for the teaching of these prevention strategies. Parents were asked whether their child responded with fear to prevention efforts, and whether they had attended the parent in-service workshop. Parents who had not attended were asked to indicate why. Space was provided for parent questions and comments. A static group comparison research model was used to analyze the data. Findings suggest specific ways of improving parent in-services outreach on sexual abuse prevention. (RH)

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HOW KINDERGARTEN PARENTS PERCEIVE THEIR ROLE IN SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION

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Research findings on the incidence and effects of child sexual abuse are alarming. The existence and prevalence of the problem have been widely reported in the professional literature and the lay press. In response, numerous educational prevention programs have become available for young children and are currently mandated in some states. Many of these programs provide information and advice for parents; tapes, books, articles, and television specials aimed at educating parents about this topic have proliferated. It is unclear, however, what prevention efforts parents are actually making and what attitudes parents have about prevention education.

LITERATURE ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parent involvement is recognized as important to prevention efforts by professionals in the field (Adams, Fay 1986; Plummer 1986; Conte 1985; Cooper, Lutter, Phelps 1983). A fundamental purpose of prevention has been to break the silence surrounding sexual abuse (Cooper et.al. 1983). Parents could play an important role simply by opening communication with their children on the topic. One researcher, Finkelhor (1984), has investigated what parents told their children about sexual abuse. In his Boston study somewhere between fourteen and twenty percent of the parents of children younger than nine years old reported discussing sexual abuse with their children. Half of all parents reported discussing the topic but many of the discussions were vague and constituted "little more than an extension of the discussions on kidnapping." Mothers told their children significantly more than fathers; sex of the child was not significant. When parents were asked why they did not discuss sexual abuse,although aware of the dangers of it, four common responses were given.

These were: difficulty discussing sex in general and sexual abuse in particular; fear of frightening their child; feelings that their children were in little danger of being abused; and young ages of the children.

It would seem that parents whose children are participating in a prevention program at school would have an excellent opportunity to discuss the issue with their children. A search of the literature yields no studies of parent discussion with their children related to child or parent participation in prevention education. A pre-test/post-test questionnaire survey of seventeen parents who attended a sexual abuse prevention workshop did reveal a significant increase in degree of comfort parents felt with discussing the topic, "sexual misuse," at the dinner table after the in-service (LaTorre 1982).

One reason that parent involvement is important is that parents are in a unique position to individually guide their children's acquisition, retention and practice of prevention concepts. Jon Conte (1985) found that although four and five year olds who participated in a three hour sexual abuse prevention program at their day care center increased their knowledge, they learned only about half of the program's content. An evaluation by Carol Plummer (n.d) in another setting found knowledge of prevention concepts was lost two and eight months after a school prevention program. A booster session following another program was shown to aide knowledge maintenance gains (Ray, F.A., n.d). Parents are one resource for providing review and practice of concepts to children; parents have the advantage and opportunity to do so in a natural setting.

Carol Plummer (1986) writes, "prevention education is in part an act of faith." What parents believe prevention education can accomplish and who they see as responsible for carrying it out has been investigated only slightly. Martha Herndon (1984) reports that 98% of the parents of pre-schoolers who participated in a Washington state prevention program believe that their children will be safer as a result. Researchers who have surveyed parent opinion of specific programs report that parents rate the programs highly (Johnson 1987; Herndon 1984; Huber 1984; LaTorre 1982). High ratings are defined as parents saying, "the program was very good, very useful, or suitable for community children." According to Sandra Butler (1986) anecdotal reports indicate that the inclusion of parent education is related to parent enthusiasm.

Nevertheless, possible community and parental resistance to sexual abuse prevention programs is frequently alluded to in the literature (Johnson 1987; Adams, Fay 1986; Plummer 1986; Conte 1985). There are several possible reasons for expecting parental resistance to education for the prevention of sexual abuse. For one, awareness of children's sexual abuse and development of prevention programs is due in large part to feminists' involvement, and the feminist movement is certainly not fully accepted in our society. Prevention educators are also sensitive to the fact that a substantial number of abusers are relatives or friends of the family and some (1-4.5%, depending on study) are parents of the child; these factors are expected to be highly emotionally charged. Another reason for expecting parental resistance may be the highly publicized, negative reactions to sex education in the schools.

Finally, concerns by professionals that prevention efforts may frighten young children (Furman 1987; Adams 1986) mirror the concerns expressed by Boston parents in David Finkelhor's study (1984). Martha Herndon (1984) in questioning parents about the reaction of their pre-school children, found that five percent of the parents felt that the program "frightened or caused a problem" for their child.

Parents do seem to be strong supporters of school prevention programs (Butler 1986). Finkelhor did find widespread support for sexual abuse education in schools by parents, many of whom had not themselves discussed the issue with their children. How parents see their responsibility related to school responsibility is largely uninvestigated. It is also unknown whether parents feel that classroom teachers should include prevention skills in their teaching or whether parents feel that schools should depend on community resource programs.

THE CHILD ASSAULT PREVENTION PROJECT

The Child Assault Prevention Project (CAP), Columbus, Ohio, is a popular educational program designed to reduce elementary school childrens' vulnerability to sexual assault. It has individualized components structured for teachers, parents, and children. The theoretical and philosophical basis of CAP is feminist (Cooper, et.al. 1984).

The children's workshop is designed for kindergarten through sixth grades; parent permission is required for the child's participation. One hour classroom workshops are presented by three fully trained CAP staff members. One adult

facilitates and leads problem solving discussions while the other two adults role play possible situations. Goals are to educate children to be able to identify potentially threatening situations; to generate realistic options to situations; to see alternative/assertive behavior models; and to practice alternative/assertive behaviors. The classroom workshop is followed by a crisis intervention time when individual children have the opportunity to speak privately to a CAP staff member. The CAP personnel are mandated reporters of suspected abuse or neglect. Often children discuss situations that do not fall under abuse or neglect. Whatever the child's concern, the staff member provides support, works towards problem solving with the child, and connects them with appropriate resources.

Parents and teacher workshops are offered separately prior to the childrens' workshops. Teachers are expected to attend while parental attendance is voluntary. The purpose of the adult workshop is to provide education and build support for the CAP program (Cooper 1984). Parent cooperation in attaining CAP goals is considered fundamental to the program's success since parents are likely to be the most constant resource in children's lives.

Examination of CAP records in DuPage County, Illinois reveal that a minority of parents in any given school attend the workshop that is offered. This fact is one that concerns the director and the coordinator of the CAP Project in DuPage County (personal communication). They wonder why parents do not attend and whether prevention concepts are reinforced by parents.

METHOD

Parents of young children who had participated in the CAP program were surveyed to gather descriptive data on parent child discussions, practice of prevention strategies, and parent attitudes. The group of parents interviewed included those who had attended the parent in-service as well as those who had not. Possible differences between these two sets of parents are examined in this study. This information is sought for the purpose of recommending improvements for parent in-services and outreach to non-attending parents.

Parents of kindergarten children served as subjects. Fifty-seven of a possible 112 parents participated; only one parent per child was interviewed. Twenty-nine male children and twenty-eight female children had parents represented. Parents resided in the western suburbs of Chicago (DuPage County). Educational level of the parents ranged from ninth grade to graduate level education with a median of one year of college. Forty-eight of the parents were married; nine of the kindergarteners represented had a stepfather and one had a stepmother. An average of 2.6 children lived in each family; ten of the families had "other adults besides parents" living in the home. Fifty-one of the parents were mothers; six were fathers.

A questionnaire was developed and tested prior to use. Strategies were taken from curriculum content of prevention programs. The questionnaire was evaluated as to appropriateness of concepts by experienced prevention educators and family life education professors. A pilot test was conducted in a separate

school district. As a result of the evaluations and pilot testing several changes, additions, and deletions were made. Eight parents of five and six year old children completed a practice interview and a split half reliability was performed using the Spearman rank correlation co-efficient yielding a reliability of .88 for the questionnaire.

Part One of the questionnaire identified data about the parents such as their relationship to the child, sex of child, marital status, number of children in household, educational level, presence of a step-parent or adults other than the parents in the home. Part Two contained four questions about discussion of the CAP program and sexual abuse prevention in general. Part Three listed sixteen possible prevention strategies. Parents were asked to respond, "yes" or "no" to the question, "have you ever done (or said) ----?" The next set of seven questions involved the parents' attitudes towards sexual abuse prevention's potential for success and whom they believe should be responsible for such education. Parents were asked whether their child responded with fear to prevention efforts, and whether or not they had attended the in-service. Parents who had not attended were asked to choose a reason (including, "other") for not being able to attend. The final section was for the parent to comment or ask questions.

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

A static group comparison research model was utilized. This model is a pre-experimental design which protects against internal validity threats of history, testing, instrumentation and regression. It does not protect for

selection. The findings may, therefore, have limited generalizability.

Both the frequency and percent of parents who reported using various strategies are reported. Strategies were ranked from most-often to least-often reported. The x^2 for one sample case tests whether the total group of parents are evenly distributed between "yes" and "no" answers to each question. An expected frequency of fifty percent was chosen for two reasons. First, one half of the parents in David Finkelhor's study (1984) reported discussing sexual abuse in a general vague way. Secondly, a fifty-fifty split could be attributed to chance answers of "yes" and "no." Parent answers to the attitude questions were reported for the total group in percentages that agree, lean to agree, lean to disagree, and disagree.

Frequency, percentage, and rank are used to report discussions and use of strategies between those parents who attended and those who did not attend the in-service. Frequencies of "yes/no" answers for the two groups are cast into a 2x2 table; the x^2 for two independent samples is used to determine if the proportion of parents who attend the in-service discuss or use particular strategies more than parents who do not. Percentage figures are used to jointly rank both groups on use of prevention strategies. The Mann Whitney U Test is used to test whether the attending parents used overall more strategies than the non-attending. Percentages for both groups are reported on the attitude questions also. Frequencies of reasons why parents did not attend the in-service are given.

Two schools which were offering CAP for the first time were selected for this study. All five kindergarten classes in the two schools were included. These were the only two districts that were offering CAP for the first time; other districts had offered CAP each year. In schools which repeated the in-service the attendance issue would be confused by parents who had or had not attended the in-service in past years.

A letter explaining the survey was sent home to each parent of a kindergarten child; a permission slip to be returned to the school was attached to each letter. Twelve parents were excluded because they did not speak enough English to complete the interview. Eight parents actively refused consent by returning a permission slip marked "no;" twenty-four parents passively refused by not responding to the letter. Eleven parents could not be reached, due either to their temporary absence from the home or interruption in telephone service.

The author contacted parents by telephone within one week of the kindergarten class presentation. The parent in-service had been offered the week prior to the classroom presentations. At the end of the telephone interview parents were free to make any comments or ask any questions. Because of the sensitive nature of sexual assault and because it is likely that some of the parents are survivors of sexual assault the interviewer was trained in rape crisis line telephone skills (by the local rape crisis center) before undertaking the interviews.

FINDINGS

A significant majority of parents (70.2%) reported discussing the CAP program with their children. (See Table 1 below.) Children initiated the discussion slightly more than half of the time; comments by parents indicated that a CAP button pinned to the child's shirt was an important catalyst for discussion at home. A significant majority of the parents also indicated that they had discussed sexual assault prevention in the past.

TABLE 1

TALKING ABOUT PREVENTION

	# Of Yes	Percentage	X^2
Discuss CAP with child?			
Total Parents	40 of 57	70.2	9.3*
Attended In-service	15 of 16	93.7	
Did not Attend	25 of 41	61.0	
Ever talk about sexual assault prevention?			
Total Parents	38 of 57	66.6	6.3*
Attended In-service	11 of 16	68.7	
Did not Attend	27 of 41	65.8	

* Significantly different at .05 level.

Table Two was constructed to determine if the parents who had discussed prevention in the past were the same parents who had discussed CAP. Thirty of the parents had both discussed CAP and discussed abuse prevention in the past. CAP was discussed by ten parents who said they had never discussed the topic before. Nine parents had discussed neither.

TABLE 2

DISCUSSIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE PAST

	Talked About in Past			Didn't Talk About in Past		
		#	%		#	%
Talked about CAP?	Total	(30)	52.6	Total	(10)	17.0
	Attended	(11)	68.7	Attended	(4)	25.0
	Didn't	(19)	46.3	Didn't	(6)	14.6
Didn't talk about CAP	Total	(8)	14.0	Total	(9)	15.8
	Attended	(0)	0	Attended	(1)	6.2
	Didn't	(8)	19.5	Didn't	(8)	19.5

The parents reported use of prevention strategies gives some insight into the role that these parents have taken as educators on this topic. (See Table 3) It seems that parents are very aware of the need for evaluating and checking on their children's personal safety. All parents indicated that they had evaluated their children's play environments for safety; comments made by some parents indicated that they have restricted their children from playing in friends' and

TABLE 3

USE OF PREVENTION STRATEGIES BY PARENTS

Strategies	Total # Yes	% Yes	Rank	x^2
Evaluate play environment for safety	57	100	1	57*
Don't talk to strangers	56	98.2	2	53.07*
Told child who to trust	54	94.7	3	45.63*
Tell me if touched	52	91.2	4.5	38.75*
Explained bribes	52	91.2	4.5	38.75*
Openly & honestly answer child's questions about sexuality	51	89.5	6	35.52*
Questioned child about activities when away from you to check on personal safety	42	73.7	7	12.79*
Talk about self defense	39	68.4	8	7.74*
Told difference okay/ not okay touch	34	59.6	9	2.12
Taught child correct names-private parts	33	57.9	10	1.42
Practice safety yell	32	56.1	11	.86
Told child, "listen to your feelings"	25	43.9	12	.43
Read books on sexual assault with child	22	38.6	13.5	2.96
Told child, "no secrets"	22	38.6	13.5	2.96
Practice self defense	18	31.6	15.5	31.58*
Practice saying "no" to adults	18	31.6	15.5	31.58*

* Significant difference at .05 level.

neighbors' houses and even from attending pre-school programs. About three quarters of the parents said they questioned their child with the idea of checking on whether the child had been safe from sexual abuse when away from them. Several of the parents who answered, "no" to this question elaborated that their children were never out of their supervision except when attending kindergarten; others said that only family members babysit for their child. Apparently, these parents have not considered that school personnel or relatives could be offenders. The vast majority (94.4%) of parents also said that they had told their children whom to trust and whom they could turn to for help. Exactly how effective parents are at choosing trustworthy individuals is difficult to ascertain.

Children are adequately warned about strangers. How parents explained bribery to children was linked to "stranger stereotypes;" many parents said, "bribes, oh yes, I told him never to take candy or money."

Over ninety percent of the parents had told their children to tell them if they were touched by anyone, yet only about sixty percent had defined the nature of "not okay" touching or taught the correct terminology for genitalia. Consequently, children are lacking important basic information for identifying sexual assault. Parents need to use their purported openess and honesty about sexuality to define the nature of sexual assault for their children.

Overall, active strategies such as reading books, practicing self defense, and practicing saying "no" were ranked low on the list. More than half of the parents had heard and practiced the "safety yell" taught by CAP, though.

Significantly more than half (68.4%) of the children had been told that they have a right to defend themselves if someone initiates physical measures against them. Far fewer (31.6%) of the parents had ever actively taught or practiced methods of self defense with their child; most mothers answering affirmatively said that their husbands had done this but they had not. The single strategy most touted by prevention educators, practice saying "no" was lowest on the list of strategies used by parents.

Two other important prevention strategies ranked low. About forty-four percent of the parents encouraged their children to listen to their feelings. Most parents wanted a better definition of what was meant by this strategy. It was defined as "following that 'uh-oh' feeling that I am uncomfortable in this situation and I need to get out of it. This is a feeling that can occur in many different situations. We are trying to get at whether you have talked about this or supported your child in such situations." About thirty-nine percent of the parents told their children that adults should not ask them to keep secrets.

These parents believe prevention education will be successful. Almost eighty-eight percent tended to believe education can reduce the number of children who are assaulted. Ninety-eight percent tended to believe it will help children tell about incidents. Table Four presents the breakdown of definite versus slight agreement.

TABLE 4

ATTITUDES OF PARENTS IN PERCENTAGES

Question: Do you think teaching children to prevent sexual assault ...		% Agree	% Agree	% Disagree	% Disagree
will reduce # of children who are assaulted?	Attended	68.7	18.7	6.2	6.2
	Didn't Attend	82.9	4.9	9.7	2.4
	Total	78.9	8.8	8.8	3.5
will make children more likely to tell?	Attended	81.2	12.5	6.2	0
	Didn't Attend	82.9	17.1	0	0
	Total	82.4	15.8	1.7	0
is mainly the parents' responsibility?	Attended	50.0	31.2	6.2	12.5
	Didn't Attend	56.1	34.1	2.4	7.3
	Total	54.4	33.3	3.5	8.8
should be done by classroom teachers?	Attended	43.7	50.0	0	6.2
	Didn't Attend	80.5	14.6	4.9	0
	Total	71.9	22.8	3.5	1.7
should be done by programs like CAP?	Attended	100.0	0	0	0
	Didn't Attend	100.0	0	0	0
	Total	100.0	0	0	0

Do you think that you child has been frightened by any of your prevention efforts?

Total: Yes: 8.8 No: 82.5 Don't Know: 8.8

Although most parents do accept prevention education as mainly their responsibility they are eager to share the task with teachers and community agencies. There was 100% support for programs like CAP. Parents also support the idea that classroom teachers should cover prevention skills in the regular curriculum. Many parents on the "agree" side qualified their position by stating that those teachers should have specialized education before teaching such skills.

Five of the fifty-seven parents said that their prevention efforts had frightened their child. This does not tell the full story, however, as three parents volunteered that they wanted to scare their children. It seems they believe that fear will motivate their child to avoid abusive encounters. One of the parents who said the child was fearful revealed that the child had been victimized in the past and, therefore, fear was to be expected.

Parents who attended the in-service differ from parents who did not in several ways. All parents who attended the in-service are married; only fifty-six percent of the non-attending parents are married. Attending parents have a educational level of fourteen years compared to a median of twelve years for non-attending parents. One of the attending and nine of the non-attending parents live in homes with adults other than their spouse. Parents do not differ on number of children, gender of children, or marriage to a step-parent of the child.

More parents who attended the in-service discuss the CAP program with their child (93.7% compared to 61%). Attendance versus non-attendance does not appear to be related to having discussed the topic of sexual abuse prevention before. Obviously, those parents who attend the in-service would know more about the program and thus have more information to discuss with their child.

Prevention strategies were not used by significantly more of the attending parents. The Mann Whitney U Test yielded a z of ≥ 1.145 which has a probability of $\leq .1271$. Since .05 was the level set for significance H_0 could not be rejected.

Three specific prevention strategies were used by significantly different proportions of parents within each group. (See Table 5) The x^2 for two independent samples indicated that more parents who attended had explained what inappropriate touching was to their children. A higher proportion of non-attending parents, however, had encouraged their children to listen to their feelings and had practiced saying, "no" to adults.

Parents who did not attend had higher levels of definite agreement on two attitude questions. They agreed more strongly that prevention education will reduce the number of assaulted children and that classroom teachers should cover prevention education. Perhaps this difference reflects that the in-service effectively communicated the complexity of sexual assault and its consequent prevention.

TABLE 5

COMPARISON OF PREVENTION STRATEGY USE

	16 Attended			14 Didn't Attend			
Strategies	# Yes	%	# Rank	Yes	%	Rank	X^2
Evaluate play environment for safety	16	100.0	1.5	41	100.0	1.5	-
Don't talk strangers	15	93.7	3.5	42	100.0	1.5	-
Told child who trust	16	100.0	1.5	38	92.7	4.5	-
Tell me if touched	15	93.7	3.5	37	90.2	6.0	-
Explained bribes	13	81.2	6.0	39	95.1	3.0	-
Openly & honestly answered questions about sexuality	13	81.2	6.0	38	92.7	4.5	-
Questioned child when away from you check on personal safety	12	75.0	8.0	30	73.2	7.0	.02
Talk about self defense	10	62.5	11.0	29	70.7	8.0	.842
Told diff OK/not OK touch	13	81.2	6.0	21	51.2	10.5	3.15*
Taught correct names of private parts	11	68.7	9.5	22	53.6	9.0	.54
Practice safety yell	11	68.7	9.5	21	51.2	10.5	.813
Told child, "listen to your feelings"	5	31.2	14.5	20	48.8	12.0	2.23*
Read books on sex assault with child	7	43.7	12.0	15	36.6	14.5	.038
Told child, "no secrets"	6	37.5	13.0	16	39.0	13.0	.167
Practice self defense	5	31.2	14.5	13	31.7	15.0	.12
Practice to say, "no" to adults	3	18.7	16.0	15	36.6	14.5	2.62*

* Significant .05 level

- x^2 not permissible EF's < 5.

Non-attending parents were largely unable to attend because of constraints of time, conflicting responsibilities, and family illness. (See Table 6) Interestingly, not one parent choose the reason that sexual assault would probably not be a problem for their child. Everyone spontaneously responded to that choice with comments about how stupid/naive it would be to think that.

TABLE 6

REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING IN-SERVICE

Reason	#
Too much responsibility at home and or work	16
Inconvenient time or date	15
Other	
Illness in family	6
No babysitter	2
Didn't know about it	1
Know enough about topic already	1
Sexual assault will not be problem for my child	0

DISCUSSION

Increasing numbers of parents seem to be making an effort to educate their children about sexual assault prevention. Parents could, however, improve their use of prevention strategies. In view of the overwhelming support expressed by parents for prevention education, it seems that educators do not need to build support for the existence of such prevention education programs. These programs do not appear to be at all controversial from the parental point of view.

Research on parental involvement in sexual abuse prevention needs to continue. There are many questions worth investigating. It would be helpful to know the content of parent-child discussions of prevention programs. It would also be helpful to know how much parents understand about the relationship of offenders to children and the methods offenders use to entrap children. Another issue is whether parents who adhere to the philosophical principles, (e.g. feminism, childrens' rights advocates) which underlie prevention programs do a better job of prevention education with their children. Experimental efforts to help parents improve the content and methods of their prevention education need to be conducted and reported.

Specific suggestions for improving parent in-services on sexual abuse prevention are suggested by the findings. Emphasis needs to be put on the nuts and bolts of prevention if parents are to be truly active in reinforcing and practicing prevention skills with their children. Parents would probably benefit from specific advice on how to define sexual abuse to their children. Parents also need concrete examples of how to support children's feelings; they need to be convinced of how important that skill is to prevention and disclosure. Parents probably need the most guidance on teaching assertiveness skills to children. Parents will need to see and hear examples of assertive child behavior to dispel concern that assertive children are unruly and undisciplined. Suggestions for simple verbal "games" or "role plays" to practice at home can be given to parents. Unfortunately, there are a number of inappropriate childrens' books that contain vague and distorted information on sexual abuse; a recommended booklist (of well done books) could be provided to those parents who are inclined to read to their children.

Non-attending parents need to receive outreach. It is sometimes assumed that parents who do not attend are not interested or involved in the issue. This study indicates that assumption to be false. Handouts and guides available at the in-service could be made available to non-attending parents through the school. A videotape of the parent in-service could be made available to schools or to parent-teacher groups; parents could arrange to check out the video to view at their discretion and convenience.

A parent-child discussion guide of the program should be available. This may help encourage reinforcement of program content. The guide could include key points to be stressed. It could also contain some examples of open-ended problem solving questions as well as some concrete, factual questions.

It will be a long time before we will know how successful such prevention efforts are. Parental involvement is important, perhaps critical, to success. Improvement needs to be made in the quality of parental reinforcement of prevention concepts. Parent in-service is one vehicle for encouraging such immprovement. The effort is worth making. The stakes are high.

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